

Fort Walsh National Historic Park

Cover: Log construction, typical of buildings
originally at Fort Walsh

Fort Walsh

Fort Walsh, in the Cypress Hills, Saskatchewan, was founded in 1875 by the North-West Mounted Police. It became headquarters of the Force in 1878 and during its eight-year life played a vital role in the peaceful settlement of the Canadian West.

Establishing Fort Walsh

"A man's life was worth a horse, and a horse was worth a pint of whiskey." Thus did an Edmonton editor describe conditions in Canada's vast "North-West Territories" in the decade prior to 1874. To bring law and peace to the region, the Dominion government organized the North-West Mounted Police Force, which arrived in the West in the fall of 1874 and quickly began setting up a series of posts across what is now Alberta and Saskatchewan.

One of its immediate tasks was to suppress an illegal traffic in whisky which was bringing poverty and demoralization to the 30,000 Plains Indians who formed the bulk of the population in the Territories. The Cypress Hills area was a major centre of the trade. Accordingly, Superintendent James M. Walsh and 'B' Troop were sent there in June 1875 to stop the illicit trade and build a police fort.

Walsh headed for the central valley of Battle Creek and chose a site 1½ miles north of the place where the notorious Cypress Hills Massacre had occurred in 1873. Barracks, offices, stores and stables, surrounded by a stout stockade of upright logs, were soon erected.

Fort Walsh grew rapidly in importance, and thus in size. By 1880 it was 300 feet square, with 20 buildings, and could accommodate over 200 officers and men. Close by the fort a bustling frontier town sprang up. A centre for traders and hunters it had, at its height, a population of perhaps one thousand.

Life and Duties at the Fort

A policeman's day began at 6:00 a.m. His first task was stable duty at 6:30. Parades were at 8:30 a.m., and at 2:00 p.m. Mealtimes were breakfast 7:30 a.m., dinner 1:00 p.m., supper 6:15. Rations—consisting of 1½ lbs. of bread, the same amount of meat, some potatoes, rice or beans; dried apples, tea and coffee, sugar, and some pepper and salt—were issued daily at 4:30 p.m. A recruit wrote home: "our grub is not the most refined, but a good appetite does wonders in getting down dry bread, tea, and coffee without milk and sugar . . .

James Morrow Walsh (Glenbow)



vegetables and such luxuries are not to be got . . ." Game was plentiful however, and wild fruit in summer.

About his duties the same recruit wrote, "We get lots of parades, guard mounting, fatigues, and our spare time is taken up cleaning . . . boots . . . helmets . . . stables, etc. . . ." The fatigues included cutting ice or wood and constructing or repairing the log buildings. Any constable who slacked or spoke out of turn soon found himself in the guardroom. Cleaning the fort was particularly important. A malarial type of fever was prevalent in the valley and only by scrupulous cleanliness could serious epidemics be avoided. Every summer the men moved into tents while the buildings were disinfected and whitewashed.

Riding instruction, of course, was crucial: "The recruits had a hard time with the broncos . . . Sgt. Major Lake was riding master . . . After the riders (arrived) he said: 'I won't give the details for mounting; just climb on and stay with it.' The old hands had the poor kids filled up with what the

broncos would do to them . . . it took some sand to get on . . ." After a long, hard day, the policeman retired at 10:15 to sleep on a bed of boards without a mattress.

In their off-duty hours officers and men enjoyed games of soccer, tennis, or cricket, horse racing and swimming. Townspeople and Indians often accepted their sporting challenges. In the evenings there were amateur theatricals and numerous dances. In January and February of 1880 alone, there were 13 police dances at Fort Walsh. The local Métis particularly enjoyed these, the girls being delighted to learn the steps of waltzes and polkas from the policemen.

The only drawback, in the eyes of many, was the absence of liquor. It was illegal in the Territories and very difficult to obtain. Substitutes were resorted to: "The General Drink in this Country are patented Medicines with a large percentage of Alcohol—sell, for four ounce bottles, one dollar Each. . . . Anything to make a person feel good—" (A Constable's diary).

Police Work

The policemen who lived at Fort Walsh were hardworking, tough, and brave. The "beat" of the whole Force was over 180,000 square miles, an enormous area to police even when the Force was increased from 300 to 500 in 1881. Patrols (usually 2-5 men) often lasted for weeks and it was not unusual for men to cover 4,000 or 5,000 miles in a summer, on horseback or in wagons. They often had to work all night. In winter they had to face bitter cold and blinding prairie snowstorms. Many a man returned to base with face, feet or hands badly frozen. Indian or "half-breed" scouts guided the patrols and taught the green policemen the way of the plains. Among them were Louis Laveille and the famous Jerry Potts, who knew every "head land, butte, ridge, stream, swamp and trail from the Boundary line to Red Deer River . . ."

Most of the Force's work was among the Indians but it also found "customers" in the few frontier towns.

The chief difficulty with the Indians—mostly Plains Cree, Assiniboine, Sioux and Blackfoot—was making them accept as crimes, activities which had been part of their culture. Raiding and horse stealing once brought honour to the young warrior, now they only brought him to prison. The Mounties persevered, and won, but it took considerable tact, great courage, and much time.

A visitor to Fort Walsh in 1882 witnessed a typical police case: "A civilian came . . . to Captain McIlreath . . . with the

information that his horse had been stolen . . . He gave a description . . . in this wise: 'Wa, ye see, Cap, the doggoned hoss hain't no patclier colour. I call him Blueskin. He hain't blue sure, but . . . he hain't black, and ye can't call him grey. He's a catankerous critter, but I bet ye can't beat him in these stables. Will ye take me?' The captain mildly suggested that they should find the horse before racing him . . . four men and a sergeant were detailed . . . They rode 25 miles to what is known as the South Fork . . . where they found a camp of Cree Indians. The Indians denied any knowledge of the horse, but when a thorough search was made he was found with some of their ponies. The sergeant then told the chief to give him the man who brought the horse into the camp. The chief said he didn't know who it was, but upon being told he would have to go to the Fort himself he held a council and . . . the thief was given up. It certainly speaks well for the force when four men can take a thief from among 300 sympathizers. The party returned to the Fort at 8 p.m., having ridden the fifty miles in about seven hours."

For a small party of policemen to ride into a large camp of well-armed Indians and arrest chiefs or braves became a routine task of the NWMP. It still required rare courage and coolness. It was the sort of thing Superintendent Walsh was noted for. Such actions earned the police the deep respect of the Indians, and of white frontiersmen. As an admiring Montana newspaperman wrote in 1877, "The Mounted Police don't scare worth a cent."

Another matter which earned them respect was the arrest of alleged participants in the Cypress Hills Massacre. To see whites arrested for harming Indians greatly impressed the latter with the genuineness and impartiality of the law the Mounties enforced.

Perhaps as a result of this respect only one Mountie died by violence in the first 10 years of the Force—Constable Marmaduke Grayburn—who was murdered near Fort Walsh.

Some police work was mundane. For instance, the Mounties were also the customs officials, collecting \$15,000 at Fort Walsh in 1882. But the work was never monotonous. An expoliceman, who had joined in 1879, recalled: "The duties of the Mounted Police . . . covered every phase of law, civil or criminal . . . Every commissioned officer, and every member in charge of a post, in many cases a single constable, was *ipso facto* a justice of the peace. We married people and we buried people. We acted as health inspectors, Weather Bureau officials, Indian treaty makers; but above all as diplomats, when it came to dealing with either Indians or half-breeds."



Bull. Le surintendant Walsh dut faire preuve d'une force de persuasion peu commune pour le convaincre de rencontrer la commission au fort Walsh.

Le 17 octobre, la rencontre se déroula dans la plus grande solennité, au mess des officiers. Ce fut cependant peine perdue, car les Sioux refusèrent avec dédain de considérer les propositions des Américains. Les officiers de la Police du Nord-Ouest durent négocier pendant de longues années pour que le chef indien et les membres de sa tribu retournent finalement aux États-Unis en 1881.

Les relations avec les Indiens du Canada exigeaient également beaucoup de diplomatie. Les hommes et les officiers de la Police à cheval ont grandement contribué à convaincre les Indiens des Plaines à signer des traités avec le Canada, à les respecter par la suite et à vivre dans les réserves.

Crowfoot, le célèbre chef des Pieds-Noirs, s'est fait le porte-parole de plusieurs Indiens. "Si la police n'était pas venue au pays, où serions-nous tous maintenant? De mauvais hommes



et le whisky nous tuaient si rapidement que nous ne serions pas nombreux aujourd'hui. La police nous a protégés comme les plumes d'un oiseau le protègent des gelées de l'hiver. Je leur veux à tous du bien... Je suis satisfait. Je signerai le traité."

Le facteur qui a probablement le plus contribué à la signature des traités a été l'extinction rapide du bison, principale source de subsistance des Indiens des Plaines. Face à la famine, les Indiens acceptèrent graduellement d'abandonner leur vie nomade. Pour sa part, le gouvernement s'engagea à pourvoir à leurs besoins essentiels, à leur apprendre à cultiver et à se nourrir, jusqu'à ce qu'ils deviennent autonomes.

Tous les Indiens n'étaient pas disposés à accepter les traités. L'un des principaux réfractaires était le chef des Cris des Plaines, Big Bear, qui, avec une bande de jeunes guerriers, a probablement causé à la Police à cheval plus de difficultés que tous les autres Indiens.

Tout en connaissant d'avance la tournure des événements, Big Bear était déterminé à résister, dans l'espoir d'obtenir de

meilleures conditions du gouvernement. Il était contre la violence, mais ses téméraires compagnons d'armes l'incitaient à l'action. Deux fois, il menaça d'attaquer le fort Walsh et, à une occasion, sa troupe encercla la palissade en lançant des cris de guerre et en faisant feu sur le fort.

À l'intérieur, la police attendait en état d'alerte, mais plus tard, les anciens dirent que les fusils maniés par les nouvelles recrues les avaient plus inquiétés que l'attaque des Cris. La famine força enfin Big Bear à signer un traité.

En décembre 1882, plus de 44,000 livres de bœuf et 350,000 livres de farine furent distribués aux Indiens comme "allocations de famine" et, même alors, la police du fort Walsh pouvait seulement donner une ration de deux jours qui devait en durer sept.

L'histoire mouvementée du fort Walsh prit fin en 1883. Depuis quelque temps, il ne suffisait plus à la tâche et, en 1882 un nouveau quartier-général fut installé à Regina. De plus, le fort attirait les Indiens qui pensaient y obtenir de la nourriture et qui, par conséquent, restaient hors de leurs réserves. Pour mettre fin à cette situation, l'ordre fut donné d'abandonner le poste.

Le détachement se rendit à Maple Creek, près du nouveau chemin de fer du Canadien Pacifique et, en mai et en juin 1883, le fort Walsh fut démantelé. Il ne sera cependant jamais oublié. Pour un grand nombre d'agents de la Police à cheval du Nord-Ouest et de leurs successeurs de la GRC, le fort Walsh a été et demeure "le berceau de la Police à cheval."

Le poste de remonte

En 1942, la Gendarmerie Royale du Canada, qui éprouvait à ce moment de la difficulté à se procurer des chevaux, décida d'établir son propre poste de remonte, ou haras, au fort Walsh. Le site fut choisi en grande partie à cause de son passé historique et, afin d'évoquer l'atmosphère du premier fort, les bâtiments furent construits en rondins, selon le style des années 1870. Le poste de remonte resta en service jusqu'en 1968 et plusieurs chevaux de classe y furent élevés. L'un d'entre eux, *Burmese*, fut présenté à sa Majesté la Reine, qui le monta lors de la cérémonie du salut au drapeau. Lorsque le poste fut transféré en Ontario, les bâtiments et les terrains furent remis au Service des lieux historiques nationaux et font maintenant partie du parc historique national du fort Walsh.

Le poste de traite de Farwell

Une des choses les plus intéressantes à visiter au parc du fort Walsh est le poste de Farwell, établissement de traite frontalier, qui a été reconstruit et complètement meublé. Il est

situé à un mille et demi au sud du fort Walsh, à l'endroit même où eut lieu le massacre de Cypress Hills.

Le premier poste avait été construit à l'automne 1872 par Abel Farwell du fort Benton, au Montana. Farwell et sa femme indienne, Mary, y vivaient, de même que l'interprète Alexis Lebomard et sa femme, George Hammond (occupation inconnue), sa femme et deux employés, Bourke et Kerr. Deux autres commerçants, Marshall et Peterson, habitaient une cabane à l'arrière du poste. L'établissement de Moses Solomon se trouvait de l'autre côté du ruisseau et il y en avait plusieurs autres dans les environs.

La plupart des commerçants américains de l'époque vendaient du whisky à leurs clients indiens. Farwell, qui s'en défendait, affirmait cependant que Peterson et Solomon se livraient à ce trafic. Il se contentait pour sa part de vendre des marchandises qui lui rapportaient moins, mais qui étaient également moins risquées, notamment des haches, des perles de verroterie et des couvertures; on peut voir un assortiment complet de ces objets dans le nouveau bâtiment.

Les postes de Farwell et de Solomon furent incendiés le lendemain du massacre, vers la fin mai ou le début de juin 1873. Farwell fut par la suite le principal témoin à charge dans les procès intentés aux auteurs du massacre. Son témoignage suscita une si grande hostilité au Montana, qu'il revint au Canada; il dirigea plus tard un service postal pour la Police à cheval du Nord-Ouest.

En 1967, les postes de Farwell et de Solomon furent reconstruits par la Gendarmerie royale du Canada dans le cadre des programmes de célébration du Centenaire.



Affaires indiennes
et du Nord

Indian and
Northern Affairs

Parcs Canada

Parks Canada

Publié par Parcs Canada avec l'autorisation
de l'hon. Jean Chénier, CP, député,
ministre des Affaires indiennes et du Nord.
© Information Canada, Ottawa 1973
N° de catalogue R64-5173
Publication AINC No Q5-1394-000-BB-A1
Présentation: Ian Valentine + Associés